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CURRENT SUPERSTITIONS.

II.

OMENS OF DEATH (CONTINUED).

It was remarked in the last number that the fifty death warnings contained in the introductory paper of this series form only a small part of those still surviving in the country. In illustration of this statement we give a few additional omens, received after the article in question had been printed. It should further be mentioned that a large number of signs derived from the behavior of animals, such as the howling of a dog at night, the flight of a bird into a chamber, and the like, have been omitted, as likely to be the subject of treatment in studies of "Animal and Plant Lore," now in course of preparation by Mrs. Fanny D. Bergen.

1. If members of a family, after long separation, meet for a reunion, some one of the members will die within the year. (Cambridge, Mass.)

2. If an empty rocking-chair is seen to sway back and forth when apparently unoccupied, it is supposed that the chair is held by the spirit of some deceased member of the family, who has come back to choose the next to go, and call that person quickly. ("Harper's Bazar.")

3. If a rocking-chair be seen to move backwards and forwards while unoccupied, it indicates a death in the family. (Michigan.)

4. It is a bad sign to drive past a funeral procession. (Maine.)

5. Put on a widow's crape bonnet, and your husband will die within the year. (Boston, Mass.)

6. If a garment is cut out on Friday, the person for whom it is made will not live unless it is finished on the same day. (South Indiana.)

7. If you begin a quilt on Friday, you will never live to finish it. (Maine.) An act of this sort gave great distress to a domestic servant, who, until the completion of the quilt, daily expected disaster. This woman was from the French part of Canada.

We add two signs belonging to Europe, though obtained in this country : —

8. A tallow loop in a candle, called a coffin-handle, denotes a death in the family. A black snuff-cap on top of the wick signifies the plumes of the hearse. (Isle of Jersey.)

9. No domestic washing must be done on New Year's day, for

If you wash clothes on New Year's day,
You'll be sure to wash a friend away.

(Isle of Jersey.)

With respect to their *raison d'être*, the omens which have been enumerated in this series may be divided into two classes. Some of them are pure survivals; that is, having originated in a system of ideas now outgrown, they have no apparent reason, but are retained only by force of habit. In this case, it often happens that they have come to be kept up from motives very different from those which led to their introduction. What was once superstition has passed into mere ceremonial, and is regarded as the natural expression of sentiment. In some cases, by comparative investigation, it is possible to ascertain the ideas in which they originated; in other instances, their origin remains uncertain or obscure. The cause would probably be intelligible if we knew the ancient associations of ideas which led to such conclusions; but at present they survive simply as unreasoning expectations.

On the other hand, it is interesting to observe that the majority of the auguries under consideration belong to another category, inasmuch as the popular belief is perfectly comprehensible. These fancies have their root in a method of thought which has not entirely passed away. The state of mind in which they are retained is the same state of mind as that in which they originated. Although in many cases, doubtless, the heirlooms of uncounted centuries of human activity, they have outlived other opinions, and maintained themselves among civilized peoples, because of the permanence of this way of thinking, and because the connection of omen and event seemed so natural. Why is it unlucky to break a looking-glass? Because the image of the possessor is shattered. Why should the sudden striking of a clock portend disaster? Because it awakens expectation of a change in the peaceful order of life. Why should the sight of a rose out of season portend disaster? Because the flower, being untimely, has but a short time to live. This way of explanation might be extended indefinitely, but may safely be left to the judgment of readers. Nor is there now space to enter on what may hereafter become the subject of remark, the connected phenomena of portents derived from dreams and second-sight.

BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS OF CHILDREN.

The formation of the ideas of children constitutes a study equally interesting from a literary and a scientific point of view. Children who live in quiet neighborhoods, and who are much left to themselves, present an attractive subject for the notice of the psychologist; and a good collection of such observations could not fail to possess interest.

The faculties and instincts of man are subject to only slow and gradual changes. The essential difference between the civilized

human being and the savage is that the natural operation of the propensities which the former shares with the latter is checked by the barrier of experience interposed by education and tradition. The mental state of the child, in whom this restraining force as yet imperfectly operates, constantly reminds us of primitive conditions. To his lively fancy, the world of imagination is as real as that of actual existence. Many children have imaginary playmates, whose actions and feelings are to them as veritable as those of the companions by whom they are surrounded. The interval between fancy and perception is easily bridged. The ideas which they derive from books, or from the older people about them, readily become visions.

One or two examples, taken from a very limited range of observation, may give point to these general remarks.

A young lady recollects that as a child, while walking with a companion, she cried : " Why, a fairy lighted on my hand ! " The actual fact may have been that a bit of thistle-down had rested there. The child none the less carried away the impression of a real fairy.

A lady vividly remembers how, at the age of six or seven years, while walking with her aunt on an evening of brilliant starlight, while going to the spring to draw a pail of water, she saw a little creature with wings fly from one star to another, leaving behind an arc of light. She cried to her aunt, who accompanied her : " Oh, aunt, I saw a little gold-boy ! " Her aunt, somewhat shocked, and rather frightened, rebuked the child, who insisted on the literal truth of her vision.

The same child, in going into the garden at morn and evening, constantly looked into lilies and tulips in the expectation of finding a fairy lying within them.

All children, as is known, believe in Santa Claus, and find no difficulty in his flight over the house-tops and down the chimneys. It would be interesting to ascertain at what period, if left to themselves, their own observations would convince them of the unreality of their benefactor. In one instance which has fallen under our observation, this disillusion had not been effected at the age of eleven. The boy, when the truth was explained to him, was deeply grieved and troubled. So far from being unintelligent, he was rather quick of mind, and in many respects of a sceptical habit ; but explanation on the point in question had been from principle avoided.

These instances are of interest as illustrating the natural power of imaginative perception, which belongs to the present day as much as to any other period. They indicate, also, how systems of mythology alter with the change of times. The fairies whom children now have faith in, and without fear expect to see, are very different from those whom our forefathers believed to exist. These were regarded

with a mixture of feelings in which dread and aversion predominated: they belonged to the realm of darkness, they were stealers of children, they kept in custody beautiful youths and maidens, their arrows produced disease and death: it was with a view of modifying their vindictive jealousy that they were called "good people." On the other hand, the fairy of literature, modified by association with cupids and angels, is a gentle, bright, and amiable creature, a rewarder of merit, and friend of little girls. It is the fairy of this Renaissance that children now behold in vision and desire to meet. Thus it is that a belief is derived from the people, altered by literature, and afterwards, under a new form, readmitted to popular imagination.

We pass on to speak of that part of child-thought not derived from the instruction of elders, but acquired from association with other children, who again have learned it from their playmates, so that in this way an independent childish tradition is formed and maintained without the knowledge of the grown people, who have long ago forgotten the lore which they themselves once possessed and received in similar manner.

This tradition ordinarily constitutes the last refuge of a practice or superstition which was once universally accepted, and current among the leading minds of a period, but, being discredited by the cultivated class, became confined to the uneducated part of the community, and at last lingers only in the fancies of infants.

Thus it has been shown that the ring-games, kept up at the present day only by very little girls, were the dances of the middle age, in which kings and queens took part. These survived as a usage of young people, and in the most severe communities, among Puritans and Quakers, with whom the name of the dance was an abomination, childish usage kept up, unrebuked, the gayety, license, and revel of the time of Chaucer.

Superstition finds a ready welcome among children, and to collect the notions entertained by them would be only to repeat those which will find a place elsewhere. We shall therefore content ourselves with one or two instances of beliefs especially childish, the object being to call attention to the theme, and not treat it exhaustively.

Boys believe that they can prevent the stitch in the side, which is liable to be induced by running, by means of holding a pebble under the tongue. (Cambridge, Mass.) "I believe that I could run all day, and not get tired, if I could hold a pebble under my tongue," said one.

It is considered unlucky to kill a spider. Children believe it causes rain. (Niagara Falls, Ont.)

For two persons, in walking together, to pass on different sides of a post or tree, divides friendship. For this reason children are care-

ful not to do this, even if they have to fall back in order to pass in single file. The habit thus formed is so strong that many grown persons instinctively avoid separating in this way. In the country, if a boy and girl are walking together, for the boy to pass on the other side of the post would be considered as a mark of indifference. If the girl had a companion of her own sex, the latter would, under such circumstances, cast on her a meaning glance, and it might be said, "So-and-so is *mad* with Susy" (naming the girl). The boy might be entirely innocent of any intention to offend; for this usage is perhaps confined to girls. (Massachusetts.) The same principle applies to separation by a third person passing between two companions. The writer knows of a case in which an educated woman was much disturbed because, in a crowd, a stranger forced his way between herself and the friend by whom she was escorted.

It deserves attention, that children do not believe each other on simple assertion, but require the truth of the statements made by their comrades to be attested by some species of oath.

A child to whom is told any story which he considers remarkable will usually reply by an expression of scepticism, such as, "Really and truly?" "Honestly?" "Earnest, now?" or, "You are fooling?"

The first speaker answers by some formula of asseveration, as, "Honor bright" (New England); "Deed, deed, and double deed" (Pennsylvania).

A formula which has been heard among children in the interior of Pennsylvania is, "I cross my heart," accompanied by the sign of the cross. In Maryland this phrase is well known. It is used by negroes as well as whites, as appears from the tale, "How Brer Rabbit was allowed to choose his death" (vol. i. of this Journal, p. 148): "Oh, please, good Brer Fox, lemme go this time, an' I cross my heart I nebber steal no more cabbage." The expression, at first sight, has an appearance of antiquity, as if it were an old English custom kept up among Catholics in Maryland.

The sign of the cross, however, is connected with an entirely different practice. It has been a surprise to find that such a sign is in general use, and apparently ancient, in New England. Here, however, it is made on the chin or throat. Thus in Cambridge, Mass., a boy will say: "You won't tell?" "No." "Well, cross your chin." This habit might be supposed a recent importation, exhibiting too plainly the mixture of foreign immigration with the old New England life. Yet the custom was found, not among the children of Catholics, but those of old English strain. So also in Salem, Mass., when a child wishes to make an asseveration, he wets the finger in the mouth, and signs a cross on the throat. In Lawrence, Mass., the

first part of the sign is made with a vertical stroke. On inquiry, it is found that the idea of the cross has nothing to do with the gesture. The meaning is explained by a form of the custom in which are used the words, "Hope to die if I don't," the speaker at the same time drawing the forefinger across the throat from ear to ear. (Biddeford, Me.) The act therefore signifies, "May my throat be cut if I divulge this secret." The gesture, perhaps, is symbolical of beheading.

As we write, a friend contributes a version of the formula, common in Maine, and not uncommon in Massachusetts: 1st boy, "Honor bright?" 2d boy, "Hope to die." 1st boy, "Cut your throat?" Second boy draws his finger across his throat. This is the strongest oath that can be taken by a boy.

There is another form of childish attestation, which is universally in use, and unaccompanied by a significant gesture, but seems to be only a variety of the foregoing. Little girls, without any idea of the meaning of the words, employ the asseveration:—

Certain, true,
Black and blue,

or,

Certain and true,
Black and blue,

which are sufficiently explained by a fuller form, in use among boys (Peabody, Mass.):—

Honest and true,
Black and blue,
I'll cut my head through and through,

where the speaker thus declares his intention to take his life if he violates his faith. The words "black and blue," however, are hardly explained by this intent, and it would seem that the original sense is, "May I be beaten black and blue, and may my head be cut off, if I fail to keep this oath."

A variant runs:—

Certain, true,
Black and blue,
Lay me down and cut me in two.

It is obvious that these childish customs are the survival of ancient forms of compact. The symbolic action, indicating to the imagination the consequences of deception, is considered, in primitive times, to be an essential part of an engagement. Among the Chinese in America, at the present day, it is said that the only form of oath respected is that enforced by the sacrifice of a chicken. The symbol is regarded as an indication of the consequences awaiting the perjurer, which it is supposed that the sacrifice insures. The original

idea of the children's usage does not differ from that of the Chinese superstition, except that in the latter the penalty of treachery is made visible through the medium of a victim.

It is possible that if the expression "Cross my heart" could be traced to its source, it would be found to be, not a Christian symbol, but a misunderstanding of the form of oath just mentioned, significant, perhaps, of the punishment of beheading and quartering.

It may be observed that the habit of expressing doubt, when any assertion is made, implies an opinion that the narrator is more likely to be lying or jesting than telling the truth. The same implication is contained in ejaculations of grown-up persons, now used only as expletives, without any intention of expressing disbelief. For example: "Really!" "You don't mean it!" "Sho!" (Yankee dialect for pshaw.) "You're gassing!"

The history of this expression, already explained (No. 4, p. 64), is germane to the present inquiry. The knights of the middle age were in the habit of indulging in extravagant accounts of their own feats, called *Gabs* or *Gas*, whence is derived the term we use as a slang expression. Any one who has observed boys will have remarked their similar custom of bragging, which is, after all, only the custom of heroes of the epos from the time of Pentaur the Egyptian. Their boasts are no more to be received as literal fact than would have been the recital of his own prowess by a champion of three thousand years ago. Hence the habit of expressing disbelief of a remarkable narrative.

As certain gestures and phrases constitute an obligation to truth telling, so others excuse from the obligation. Thus the utterance of the words "over the left," or "in a horn," indicate that the assertion is not to be taken seriously. It is not always necessary that the person addressed should understand this qualification. Thus, a number of years ago, a boy who desired to make an extravagant story would point with his thumb over his left shoulder. If he should succeed in accomplishing this without the observation of the boy to whom he was talking, so much the better. (Biddeford, Maine.) In the city of New York it was sufficient to cross the fingers, elbows, or legs, though the act might not be noticed by the companion accosted, and under such circumstances no blame attached to a falsehood. It is somewhat curious that the cross should thus have a double character as requiring truth, and as dispensing with its necessity. In the latter case, the idea seems to have been that the speech was not to be accepted in a direct sense.

The custom of children contains also an imprecation against disloyalty, as in a rhyme everywhere current under various forms:—

Tell tale tit,
Your head shall be split,
And every dog in our town
It shall have a bit.

(Ohio.)

The rhyme is common in England, as appears from an article entitled "Studies of Elementary School Life," printed in "Longman's Magazine." The writer, in giving extracts from a number of school exercises written by boys, copies an "Essay on Politeness," by William Martin (apparently living in London), thirteen years of age. This essay contains the following passage :—

"It is not polite to tell tales of boys. When a boy tells a tale always call him 'Tell tale tit, Your tongue shall be split, All the dogs in the town shall have a little bit.' You'll see how red he will turn, and can't look you and the other boys in the face."

The rhyme, no doubt, was originally an imprecation, supposed, like all imprecations, to be effective in bringing about the punishment desired. Yet no child uses it with any idea of such result ; it is employed as a particularly witty and biting reproach.

When two young friends happen to meet, or during an interval of play, one will subject the other to an interrogation :—

1st child : "What's your name ?"

2d child : "Pud'n and tame :

Ask me again and I'll tell you the same."

The conversation is continued with many variations, of which the following verses may serve for examples :—

"Where do you live ?"

"In a sieve."

"Who was your mother ?"

"Bread and butter."

These rhymes, accepted as witty, though to grown persons devoid of sense, are current over a great part of the United States. The author, whoever he or she may have been, has achieved a popularity exceeding that of Longfellow or Tennyson.

The following lines are recited in making a gift of sweetmeats :—

Open your mouth and shut your eyes,
And I'll give you something to make you wise.

(Massachusetts, universal.)

Shut your eyes and open your mouth,
And I'll give you something that comes from the south.

(Ohio.)

Shut your eyes and open your hand,
And I'll give you something to make you grand.

(Ohio.)

Fanny D. Bergen.
W. W. Newell.